


Refusal Strategies Employed by Senior High School English Teachers in Adonara Timur: A Pragmatic Study

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ABSTRACT

Refusal is a complex pragmatic act that often entails face-threatening consequences, requiring speakers to balance clarity, politeness, and interpersonal harmony. This study examines the refusal strategies employed by senior high school English teachers in Adonara Timur when responding to requests outside the classroom context. Using a qualitative research design and content analysis, data were collected from 13 teachers through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT) consisting of ten situational scenarios. The responses were analyzed using Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz's (1990) taxonomy of refusal strategies. Findings show that indirect refusal strategies—such as providing explanations, expressing regret, offering alternatives, and citing external circumstances—were the most frequently used. Teachers also consistently employed adjuncts, including expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and apologies, to mitigate the force of their refusals and maintain positive interpersonal relationships. Direct refusal strategies appeared less frequently and were mostly used in situations involving institutional rules or established agreements, particularly in interactions with students. Overall, the study highlights the teachers' strong orientation toward politeness, relational harmony, and context-sensitive communication. These findings contribute to understanding the pragmatic competence of English teachers in Indonesian educational settings and offer insights for integrating pragmatic awareness into language teaching materials and professional development programs.

Keywords: *Pragmatics, Speech Acts, Refusal, Politeness, English Teacher*

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INTRODUCTION

Refusal is one of the pragmatic speech acts that plays a crucial role in daily communication. As individuals constantly navigate invitations, requests, offers, and suggestions, the act of refusing becomes an inevitable part of social interaction. In pragmatics, refusal is defined as a communicative act expressing disagreement or unwillingness to comply with another person's proposition. Because refusals carry a high risk of face-threatening consequences, speakers typically employ strategies to avoid misunderstanding and to maintain interpersonal harmony.

Refusals may be expressed directly or indirectly. Direct refusals explicitly state rejection, whereas indirect refusals involve more subtle expressions intended to soften the negative impact on the interlocutor. Mastery of refusal strategies requires not only linguistic competence but also sociocultural awareness, as inappropriate refusals can lead to miscommunication, offense, or relational tension. Sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, level of education, and social distance also influence how refusal strategies are produced and interpreted.

Previous studies have explored refusal strategies across languages, cultures, and communicative contexts. Guo (2012) compared Chinese and American refusal acts using a modified discourse completion task, revealing that both groups preferred indirect strategies such as providing reasons, offering alternatives, and expressing regret. Dewi et al. (2019) examined refusal strategies among multinational elementary students in Bali and found

differences across nationalities, particularly in the use of direct versus indirect refusals. Meanwhile, research by Damanik (2020) focused on refusal and request strategies used by teachers in classroom interactions, showing that politeness strategies – especially reasoning – play an important role in maintaining positive teacher–student relationships.

Although refusal strategies have been widely researched, studies focusing specifically on English teachers' refusal practices outside the classroom are still limited. Teachers play a crucial role in modeling communicative competence, and their use of refusal expressions can influence students' pragmatic awareness. The context of senior high school English teachers in Adonara Timur is particularly relevant, as these teachers interact with students, colleagues, and community members in diverse communicative settings beyond formal instruction.

Therefore, this study investigates the refusal strategies employed by senior high school English teachers in Adonara Timur when responding to requests outside the classroom. Understanding how teachers construct refusals in English provides valuable insights into their pragmatic competence and can contribute to the development of teaching materials related to functional expressions in the curriculum. Moreover, the findings are expected to enrich teachers' knowledge and help minimize potential misunderstandings in everyday communication.

METHOD

The method of this study consisted of several components, beginning with the research design. This study aimed to investigate the refusal strategies employed by senior high school English teachers in Adonara Timur when responding to requests. A qualitative research design was adopted because it allows researchers to explore linguistic behavior in depth and obtain detailed, contextually grounded information directly from participants. Specifically, content analysis was applied, as the focus was on identifying and classifying the linguistic forms of refusal strategies. The qualitative design also facilitated the systematic categorization of teachers' responses gathered through a Discourse Completion Test (DCT), enabling the researcher to describe the types of refusal strategies used in different communicative situations. The data were collected from 13 English teachers from senior high schools in Adonara Timur, selected because the study sought to examine how teachers express refusals across various situational contexts. Although 20 teachers were initially invited, only 13 agreed to complete the questionnaire and were included in the final sample.

Data collection was conducted online through a Google Form questionnaire distributed over a period of three weeks. The primary instrument used was the Discourse Completion Test (DCT), consisting of situational scenarios requiring participants to provide written responses that reflected how they would refuse requests in each context. This instrument enabled the researcher to capture both cognitive and linguistic processes associated with refusal strategies. The questionnaire included a series of scenarios designed to elicit refusal acts and was piloted with the same group of teachers to ensure clarity and feasibility before final administration. Data collection followed several steps, including designing the online questionnaire, obtaining participant consent, distributing the instrument, and organizing the completed responses. For data analysis, the responses were examined using the refusal strategy framework proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990). The analysis involved listing all participant responses according to each scenario, identifying and categorizing them based on Beebe et al.'s taxonomy, and calculating the frequency of each strategy to determine

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Scenarios reveals that English teachers predominantly employed three major categories of refusal strategies: direct strategies, indirect strategies, and adjuncts to refusals (supportive statements). The use of these strategies varied depending on the situational context and the social relationship implied in each scenario.

Overall, the data indicate that indirect refusal strategies were the most frequently used type. Teachers often preferred to soften their refusals through explanations, excuses, expressions of regret, or avoidance strategies. This suggests that maintaining interpersonal harmony and avoiding face-threatening acts are central concerns in teacher communication. The following tables present the examples of indirect refusal.

Table 1. Examples of The Indirect Refusal

Scenario	Participant	Responses
S1: Your colleague asks you to accompany him to a meeting. Unfortunately, you cannot. You refuse the request by saying?	P1	<i>Sorry, I wish I could make it, but can't. I have a lesson today.</i>
	P2	<i>Sorry, I wish I could make it, but I can't. I have an appointment today.</i>
	P3	<i>That's very kind of you, but I'm so sorry I have the other business.</i>
S2: When you are attending an Independence Day commemoration ceremony, you are suddenly asking to give a speech on behalf of your school. You cannot do that because you have not prepared yourself. You refuse the request by saying?	P4	<i>I'm sorry, I can't do that. I have no preparation to give a speech. Maybe if it was conveyed earlier, I could.</i>
	P6	<i>I am happy for this opportunity and I am so proud, but I don't know how I give a speech because I have not prepared myself.</i>
	P7	<i>I'm sorry maybe not this time</i>
S3: You work at school and your principal asks you to work overtime for good pay. However, you cannot work overtime. You refuse the request by saying?	P10	<i>I am sorry, but I cannot.</i>
	P11	<i>I am sorry, Sir. But I am not feeling well, so I can't work overtime.</i>
	P12	<i>I am so sorry Sir, but cannot, because I am not feeling well.</i>
	P13	<i>I am sorry, Sir. I cannot work overtime. I already have another plan.</i>
S5: Your colleague asks you to replace him as a supervisor during the national exam. Unfortunately, you cannot. You refuse the request by saying?	P1	<i>Sorry, I really wish I could make it, but I'll be unavailable that day.</i>
	P3	<i>I'm really sorry because I can't help you right now. I have to give English private course.</i>
S10: One of your colleagues asks you to help him in recap the students' grades. At the same time, you are also doing some work and cannot help him. You refuse the request by saying?	P7	<i>I am deeply sorry cannot help you. Because I want to do something I cannot leave.</i>
	P8	<i>I hope I can but unfortunately my schedule is full.</i>

Across the scenarios, participants typically prefaced their refusals with apologies (e.g., "I'm sorry..."), followed by statements of inability (e.g., "I can't..."), and justifications (e.g., "I have a lesson today," "I am not feeling well"). Many responses also included expressions of regret or wishes (e.g., "I wish I could..."), which function as supportive moves designed to reduce the potential negative impact of the refusal. These linguistic features serve to soften the rejection and affirm the speaker's concern for the relationship.

The examples presented in Table 1 illustrate the teachers' preference for indirect strategies. In Scenario 1, for instance, refusals were framed with apologies and brief explanations, demonstrating sensitivity to collegial relationships. Scenario 2 reveals similar mitigation strategies in response to an unexpected request to give a speech, where participants expressed pride or appreciation before explaining their lack of preparation. In Scenarios 3 and 5, teachers declined work-related requests by offering personal or health-related reasons, reinforcing the indirect nature of the refusal. Similarly, in Scenario 10, teachers managed competing professional responsibilities by expressing regret and clarifying their inability to assist.

Direct strategies, although used less frequently, appeared in situations where rules, policies, or mutual agreements had been clearly established, such as enforcing assignment deadlines or declining extra lessons outside school hours.

Table 2. Examples of The Direct Refusal

Scenario	Participant	Responses
S4: One of your students asks you to give extra lessons outside of school hours. You cannot do that. You refuse the request by saying?	P1	<i>I've already got something on, so I can't. Can we do that next time?</i>
	P2	<i>I have an appointment to go. Can we do that next time?</i>
	P3	<i>Although this material is important for you but I have an appointment for a meeting with the teacher council and principle.</i>
S6: One of your students asks you to extend the time for submitting the assignment. Although, you have made a mutual agreement about it. You do not want to do that. You refuse the request by saying?	P4	<i>I can't accept your assignment because we have agreed on the deadline for submitting assignments.</i>
	P6	<i>I want to extend other time for this assignment.</i>
	P10	<i>Maybe next time.</i>

While indirect strategies constituted the dominant pattern in teachers' refusals, the data also reveal the presence of direct refusal strategies, though these occurred less frequently. Direct refusals were typically employed in situations where institutional rules, established policies, or mutually agreed terms allowed teachers to decline requests without the need for extensive mitigation.

In the present study, direct strategies emerged most prominently in scenarios involving students, particularly when requests contradicted school regulations or pre-established agreements. Enforcing academic discipline—such as assignment deadlines—or maintaining professional boundaries—such as limiting extra lessons outside official hours—appeared to necessitate more explicit refusals. In these instances, teachers relied on concise statements of inability or references to rules, which functioned as legitimate grounds for refusal and reinforced their institutional authority.

Examples from Scenario 4, in which students requested additional lessons beyond school hours, show teachers responding with straightforward expressions of refusal (e.g., “I can't,” “I have an appointment”). Although some added minimal supportive moves, such as proposing another time (“Can we do that next time?”), the primary message remained direct. This reflects the teachers' need to manage professional boundaries while still demonstrating concern for their students' learning needs.

Likewise, in Scenario 6, related to extending assignment deadlines despite prior agreements, teachers issued clear-cut refusals grounded in the principle of fairness (e.g., “We have agreed on the deadline”). By invoking shared rules, teachers legitimated their refusal and emphasized students' responsibility to adhere to established academic expectations. Such responses illustrate how direct strategies can serve an important regulatory function in educational contexts.

Adjuncts, including expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and apologies, were regularly used as mitigating devices accompanying refusals. These adjuncts functioned to reduce the force of the refusal and maintain politeness.

In addition to direct and indirect strategies, the data indicate a consistent use of adjuncts to refusals—linguistic elements that do not themselves constitute a refusal but serve to soften or mitigate its impact. Adjuncts such as expressions of gratitude, appreciation, compliments, congratulations, and apologies were regularly employed by the teachers across multiple scenarios.

Table 3. Examples of The Adjunct

Scenario	Participant	Responses
S3: You work at school and your principal asks you to work overtime for good pay. However, you cannot work overtime. You refuse the request by saying?	P6	<i>Thank you for your offering but I have not anymore time for work.</i>
	P7	<i>I really appreciate it, but I am afraid I can't because my condition is not possible to work.</i>
S7: The parents of one of your students asked you to join their wedding anniversary party. At the same time, you have an appointment to meet your friend. You decide to not join the party. You refuse the request by saying?	P1	<i>Thanks for inviting me, but I have something else going on that day.</i>
	P3	<i>Thank you for the invitation but I have an appointment to meet my best friend. Please forgive me. Congratulations and happy wedding.</i>
	P6	<i>Congratulations on your wedding anniversary. Thank you for your invite. I am sorry because I have some business time.</i>
S8: It is Sunday morning. You meet your old cousin and his family in the church. The cousin is going to the beach next Sunday and he asks you to join with his family. But you cannot go. You refuse the request by saying?	P6	<i>I am happy for the planning; I want to join for this family time and I try to it. But I have a business for other meeting.</i>
	P9	<i>There is great time for us, but I am sorry, I cannot join with you and family.</i>
	P10	<i>I'd love to but I have another plan. Maybe next time.</i>

In the present study, adjuncts typically preceded or followed the refusal, functioning as an interpersonal buffer. Their use indicates the teachers' awareness of relational dynamics, especially when interacting with individuals holding higher status (e.g., principals), people outside the school hierarchy (e.g., parents), or family members. By expressing gratitude or appreciation before declining, teachers affirmed the value of the request or invitation, even if they could not comply.

The examples in Scenario 3, where the principal requested teachers to work overtime, reveal this pattern clearly. Participants used expressions such as *"Thank you for your offering"* and *"I really appreciate it"* before stating their refusal. These adjuncts helped mitigate the potential threat involved in declining a request from a superior, reinforcing respect and maintaining professional rapport.

Similarly, Scenario 7, which involved a social invitation from students' parents, elicited a high frequency of polite adjuncts, including gratitude (*"Thank you for the invitation"*), apologies (*"Please forgive me"*, *"I am sorry"*), and congratulatory expressions (*"Congratulations and happy wedding"*). These responses demonstrate the teachers' cultural and interpersonal sensitivity in declining invitations where social politeness plays a significant role.

In Scenario 8, dealing with a family-related invitation, teachers employed adjuncts such as *"I am happy for the planning"*, *"There is great time for us"*, and *"I'd love to..."* before offering their refusal. These expressions conveyed positive sentiment and appreciation for the invitation, thereby preserving family solidarity and ensuring that the refusal was not interpreted as personal rejection.

Discussions

The findings of this study reveal that English teachers predominantly employed indirect refusal strategies, followed by direct strategies and adjuncts to refusals as supportive moves. This pattern suggests that teachers carefully manage interpersonal relationships when declining requests, especially in professional and social contexts where maintaining harmony is essential. The preference for indirect refusals indicates that teachers tend to mitigate the

potential negative impact of refusing by providing explanations, apologies, and expressions of regret. Such strategies allow speakers to perform the communicative act of refusal while simultaneously attending to the interlocutor's emotional and social expectations.

The predominance of indirect strategies observed in this study aligns with previous research on refusal speech acts. According to the classification proposed by Beebe, Takahashi, and Uliss-Weltz (1990), indirect refusals typically involve strategies such as excuses, explanations, statements of regret, or expressions of inability. In the present data, teachers frequently began their responses with apologies such as "I'm sorry" or expressions of regret such as "I wish I could", followed by explanations that justified their inability to comply with the request. These linguistic patterns indicate that teachers are highly aware of the face-threatening nature of refusals and therefore attempt to soften the act through mitigation.

This tendency can also be explained through Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which posits that speakers often employ politeness strategies to protect the hearer's positive face and maintain social harmony. Refusals inherently threaten the interlocutor's positive face because they reject a request or expectation. Consequently, teachers appear to rely on indirectness and supportive expressions to reduce the severity of the refusal. By offering reasons such as prior commitments, health conditions, or scheduling conflicts, speakers present the refusal as situational rather than personal, thereby minimizing potential interpersonal tension.

Another important finding concerns the situational variation in the use of refusal strategies. Teachers tended to use indirect refusals when interacting with colleagues, principals, parents, or family members, where maintaining harmonious relationships is particularly important. For instance, in scenarios involving colleagues or school administrators, participants often combined apologies with explanations that justified their inability to comply. These responses suggest that teachers are sensitive to power relations and social distance within institutional contexts. When declining requests from superiors or peers, teachers appear to prioritize politeness and relational balance in order to maintain professional cooperation.

In contrast, direct refusal strategies were more frequently used in situations involving students, particularly when requests conflicted with established rules or institutional agreements. In such cases, teachers provided concise refusals that referred to predetermined policies, such as assignment deadlines or professional responsibilities. This pattern reflects the institutional authority that teachers hold in educational settings. By invoking rules or agreements, teachers legitimized their refusal and emphasized fairness and consistency in academic procedures. These findings support the argument that direct strategies may become more acceptable when the contextual framework already provides clear justification for the refusal.

The use of direct strategies in rule-based situations also highlights the regulatory function of refusals in educational environments. Teachers are not only responsible for maintaining interpersonal relationships but also for enforcing academic standards and institutional norms. Therefore, a more explicit form of refusal may be necessary to ensure that expectations remain clear and consistent for students. This demonstrates that refusal strategies in educational contexts are shaped not only by interpersonal considerations but also by professional responsibilities and institutional structures.

In addition to direct and indirect strategies, the findings demonstrate the significant role of adjuncts to refusals, which function as supportive discourse elements accompanying the refusal. These adjuncts include expressions of gratitude, appreciation, congratulations, and apologies that frame the refusal in a more polite and socially acceptable manner. Their frequent use indicates that teachers consciously employ politeness devices to maintain positive interpersonal relations across different social contexts.

The presence of adjuncts was particularly noticeable in scenarios involving social invitations or hierarchical relationships, such as interactions with principals, parents, or family members. In these contexts, participants often expressed gratitude for the invitation or opportunity before declining. For example, teachers used expressions such as "Thank you for

the invitation," "I really appreciate it," or "Congratulations on your wedding anniversary." These supportive moves serve to acknowledge the value of the request or invitation, thereby ensuring that the refusal does not appear dismissive or disrespectful.

This pattern reflects broader cultural tendencies in many communicative contexts where maintaining social harmony and relational respect is highly valued. By combining refusals with adjunctive expressions, speakers demonstrate politeness and empathy while still conveying their inability to comply. Previous studies have also highlighted that adjuncts play a crucial role in refusal strategies by functioning as interpersonal buffers that soften the potential impact of negative responses (Félix-Brasdefer, 2008). The findings of this study therefore reinforce the idea that refusals are rarely produced as isolated acts; rather, they are embedded within broader politeness strategies designed to preserve social cohesion.

Taken together, the results suggest that English teachers employ a strategic combination of linguistic resources when performing refusals. The predominance of indirect strategies, supported by adjunctive expressions, demonstrates a strong orientation toward politeness and relational maintenance. At the same time, the selective use of direct strategies in rule-based situations reflects the teachers' need to uphold institutional authority and academic discipline. These findings highlight the complex interaction between pragmatic competence, professional roles, and social relationships in shaping teachers' communicative behavior.

From a pedagogical perspective, the findings also suggest that teachers possess a relatively high level of pragmatic awareness when managing potentially sensitive speech acts such as refusals. Their ability to adjust strategies according to context, social status, and relational distance demonstrates an understanding of how language functions within real-life interactions. This pragmatic competence is particularly important in educational settings where teachers regularly interact with diverse interlocutors, including students, colleagues, administrators, and community members.

Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of research on pragmatics and speech acts in educational contexts by illustrating how refusal strategies are realized in teachers' professional communication. The findings emphasize that refusals are not merely expressions of rejection but are complex communicative acts shaped by politeness norms, institutional roles, and interpersonal considerations. Future research may further explore how cultural background, teaching experience, or language proficiency influence the choice of refusal strategies in similar contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the refusal strategies employed by senior high school English teachers in Adonara Timur when responding to various request scenarios. The analysis revealed that teachers relied on a combination of direct, indirect, and adjunct strategies, with indirect refusals emerging as the most dominant form. Their preference for indirect strategies—such as providing explanations, expressing regret, giving alternatives, and appealing to external circumstances—indicates a strong orientation toward maintaining interpersonal harmony and minimizing potential face-threatening effects. Teachers also consistently employed adjuncts, including expressions of gratitude, appreciation, and apologies, to soften the force of refusals. These adjuncts played an important mitigating role by signaling politeness, acknowledging the request, and preserving positive rapport. The findings suggest that refusal behavior among teachers is shaped not only by linguistic competence but also by sociocultural norms that emphasize respect, relational balance, and careful management of interpersonal interactions. Overall, the refusal strategies observed in this study align with previous research on politeness and speech act behavior, while also highlighting localized cultural practices that influence how Indonesian educators negotiate potentially sensitive communicative situations.

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